

Refugee Background Information

Refugee Facts

Today people are forced to flee their homes, their countries because of their race, religion, or beliefs. If they survive, they are refugees.

Refugees have "...a well founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion." (Refugee Act 1980)

The Refugee Act of 1980 was enacted in recognition that the post war refugee policies after World War II were inadequate to handle the hundreds of thousands of refugee fleeing Communism during the Cold War period. The Act Federalizes the refugee program and authorizes federal funds to be used for planned domestic resettlement. The Office of Refugee Resettlement provides resources to states to provide services and benefits.

Refugee arrivals in the last 25 years can be distinguished in 3 periods.

The Cold War Period – 1980-1990s

Asia/Southeast Asia – Hundreds of thousands of refugees escaping Communism

The Balkans Period – 1990s-2000

The break up of Yugoslavia and 'ethnic cleansing' lead to civil wars among the different states of the former Yugoslavia. The civil unrest in Africa gives rise to African refugees. Civil wars in Rwanda, Sudan, Somalia sends hundreds of thousands of people fleeing conflict.

The Civil Conflict Period – 2000-Present

Almost half the countries of the African continent continue in civil unrest or civil war. Refugees arrive mostly from 15 African countries. The Sudanese "Lost Boys" and Somali Bantus are identified refugee populations that have little hope of repatriation and are in need of resettlement.

Future Refugee Groups

Karen Burmese that have been encamped in Thailand for 15+years, have now been approved (2006) for resettlement. Neither the Myanmar government (Burma, renamed) nor the Thai government recognizes the Karen people. The Karen children born in the refugee camps are stateless.

Under the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000, certified victims of trafficking may receive federal and state benefits to the same extent as refugees. Identified as a high priority by the U.S. Attorney General, more resources will be made available for law enforcement to identify human trafficking victims in the U.S. These trafficking victims will require intensive services.

Utah Refugee Resettlement

Between 1983 and 2005, more than 15,000 refugees arrive in Utah. Refugees represent 10.9% of the foreign born population arriving between 1990 and 2000. Most recently, 4,248 refugees arrived between 2000 and 2005.

From the 1980s to mid-1990s, refugees were resettled along the Wasatch Front from Provo to Logan. Since the 1990s, refugee resettlement has been concentrated primarily in Salt Lake County and particularly in Salt Lake City. Housing, being the most costly expense of a family is the primary driving force for this concentration. Salt Lake City's District 2 has affordable, high-density housing units. For this reason, the refugee resettlement agencies have located most of their new refugee arrivals into this area. In addition, Salt Lake County is the economic hub of Utah. Refugee resettlement agencies work with a number of employers who are willing to employ refugees and work around language and cultural differences.

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Planned Resettlement

Overseas – The Department of State works with United Nations to identify refugee populations around the world. Once refugees are identified, the Department of Homeland Security, United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) bureau processes refugee applications. Meanwhile, as refugees are approved by USCIS, the State Department works with national refugee resettlement agencies in distribution of refugees to states, and provides resources for initial resettlement. This initial resource is for the first 30 days that a refugee is in the US. It provides funding to receive the family from overseas, secure suitable housing, and provide initial services to connect the refugee to other agencies. The resettlement agency has to provide in-kind materials and resources for furnishing the housing unit, make deposits for utilities, and provide an initial food supply to sustain the family for the first couple of weeks. The State Department has a standard of care that must be followed.

The State Department resources cover the first month of arrival, however resettlement agencies are responsible for outcomes for up to six months. The resettlement agency is dependent on securing other resources to fulfill their mission under State Department guidelines. During the first 30 days, resettlement agencies are connecting families to other federal and state support programs. Once the initial benefit from the State Department's reception and placement has expired, the refugee family is responsible for their own rent, food, health, and transportation needs.

Domestic Resettlement – the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) provides resources to states to provide services and benefits. These resources become available once the refugee has arrived in the U.S. ORR provides access to Federal benefits and support for refugees through the individual states. ORR identifies a minimum standard of care for the domestic services provided to all refugees admitted to the U.S. This includes a health screening upon entry to the U.S., and time limited financial assistance and medical assistance if no other federal support programs are available. The focus of the domestic resettlement program is to establish the refugee family and assist them achieve economic self-sufficiency as quickly as possible.

Through federal legislation, refugees are classified as qualified aliens and eligible aliens and meet the alien requirements of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996 (PRWORA). Having these designations allows refugees to access programs for financial assistance, Food Stamps, and Medicaid immediately upon arrival to the U.S. There is no provision for exemptions of participation requirements under the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). Since TANF is time limited, early employment is critical.

Role of States in Refugee Resettlement

The Office of Refugee Resettlement provides resources and to work with states on the domestic resettlement process. Utah administers refugee financial and medical benefits to new refugees and social service grants to provide employability services for refugees. Utah provides the coordination of government and non-government resources for resettlement activities and to assure equal access to services. The coordination effort addresses issues of individual and community health and safety, community development, education, and other services aimed at strengthening the individual, family, or refugee community to achieve and maintain economic self-sufficiency. The coordination of resources requires constant updating. With each new refugee group, the resettlement system has to adapt itself to new languages and new cultures.

Impact to Utah

Refugees are a vital part of Utah's economy and cultural fabric. While initially refugees access benefits and services, they represent a new workforce. As refugees establish themselves through employment, they contribute to the economy. Given opportunities, refugees become new business owners and entrepreneurs.

Refugees add new energy, cultures and languages that diversify and enrich the fabric of our society.

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